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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the present position of boys in Australian early childhood programs, especially the early years of school. The argument is made that schools are not resourced to deal adequately with the problems many children face in their daily lives. It argues that teachers are restricted in their practice through curriculum frameworks and a narrow concept of literacy that fails to acknowledge different cultural and social backgrounds, or styles of learning. As the gap between the haves and the have-nots grows increasingly wider, the paper argues that the ideological climate does not allow for the confrontation of issues, such as poverty, that influence the "life chances" of so many young children. The paper discusses circumstances influencing the educational outcomes of children in relation to gender differences, as well as economic, cultural and language factors. Contains 31 references. (Author/RS)

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Paper prepared for the AARE Conference in Fremantle, December, 2001

Title: Language, literacy and participation rights: Factors influencing educational outcomes for Australian boys

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the present position of boys in Australian early childhood programs, especially the early years of school. The argument is made that schools are not resourced to deal adequately with the problems many children face in their daily lives. Teachers are restricted in their practice through curriculum frameworks and a narrow concept of literacy that fails to acknowledge different cultural and social backgrounds, or styles of learning. As the gap between the haves and the have-nots grows increasingly wider the ideological climate does not allow for the confrontation of issues, such as poverty, that influence the life chances of so many young children. The paper discusses circumstances influencing the educational outcomes of children in relation to gender differences, as well as economic, cultural and language factors.

Introduction

This paper addresses concerns about boys and literacy. Boys appear to be behind girls on most literacy measures (Masters, 1997). However, there are also marked differences between different social and cultural groups. Therefore, boys in high socio-economic groups outperformed girls from industrial and some rural areas. Girls from each area outperformed the boys (Milburn, 2000). Such a pattern left boys, especially boys from the Aboriginal population, most at risk in our educational institutions whilst showing patterns of inequity across the whole system. The paper discusses circumstances that influence educational outcomes within a framework of children's rights especially participation rights.

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The context

The discussion is concerned with a number of factors influencing children's encounters with the education system. Whilst certain groups of children can be identified as more at risk than others, for example, there has been much attention paid to boys and literacy in Australia in the past few years (eg. Baker & Davies, 1993; Arndt, 2000; Teese, 2000), there are also inherent unfairnesses in the system that discriminate against certain groups. While gender is an issue socio-economic group and home language use are significant factors in terms of school success (Turner, 2000). With this in mind government funding decisions for state and private sector schools and mandated curriculum are factors that play an important role in the education of the child. Teacher training and classroom practices may be entrenched in ways that are resistant to new research from neural science about how children learn and also to research on the influence of culture on learning (ACDE, 2001). The over-representation of boys in intervention programs suggests assessment and referral practices need consideration.

Funding decisions have seen the present Federal government shift funding away from public schooling. This has exacerbated the differences that occur between the private and public sectors. Tax payer's per capita funding for a child in a private school is now greater than it is in the public sector (Kirby, 2001; ACEC, 2001).

Funding legislation in 2000, the Primary and Secondary Education Assistance Bill, was supported by both major parties and "enshrines educational inequality" (Davidson, 2001). In 1999 retention rates for private schools (non-Catholic) was 95.5%, the Catholic schools had a retention rate of 77.4% and the public sector 64.4% (Kirby, 2001). Differences in structural quality measures, like class sizes (Doherty-Derkowski, 1995) are also to be observed. As educational achievement is closely related to socio/economic status, education of parents and post code (Vinson, 1999) then educational reform needs to go deeper than changes to curriculum guidelines and pre-service teaching courses.

The paper addresses some of the concerns about the types of inequality and disadvantage that exist within the Australian education system. The discussion grapples with the question that not only does the approach taken to these issues encourage the maintenance of patterns of disadvantage but that in many cases policy and practice actively supports the divide that exists between the advantaged and disadvantaged in the schooling system. If schools are to best serve the community there needs to be a redefining of literacy and participation rights afforded children. This latter would mean developing systems that can value a diversity of linguistic and cultural capital and meet the educational needs of all.

Boys and literacy - which boys

There is a familiarity in the underlying factors effecting literacy outcomes and in the beliefs and attitudes that underpin present practice. Factors influencing the educational outcomes of boys in Australian education programs include economic, cultural, social and ethnic factors. Aboriginal and Torres Straight Island boys are the most discriminated against through poverty, ethnicity,

culture and also systematically within the education and legal structures of the states and territories. The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, MCEETYA, has declared educational equality for Australia's Indigenous population an urgent national priority (2000).

In 1994 the NSW Government Advisory Committee, in a report on boy's education, highlighted the need for a gender equity strategy that would include programs for boys as well as for girls. The committee found that boys were disadvantaged through gender stereotyping and this disadvantage would continue unless attitudes and expectations within the system changed. Gender stereotyping was also recorded as creating additional problems for school children from certain groups. The groups identified were Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander children, children with learning difficulties, those living in poverty, isolated rural children and those from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The literature on boys and literacy (eg. NSW Government Advisory Committee, 1994; Victorian LAP test, 1997; Kleinfeld, 1998; de Woolfson, 1999; D'Arcangelo, 1999; Eliot, 1999; Arndt, 2000; Teese, 2000; Spear-Swerling, 2000) indicate that the issue of boys in education has become the subject of major studies in Australia, New Zealand, England and America (eg. Arnot, Gray, James, Ruddock & Duveen, 1998; DETYA, 1999; Education Review Office, 1999). In Australia boys do not perform as well at reading and writing tasks in years 3 and 7 (Victorian LAP tests 1997), have a lower retention rate in year 12 and make up the majority numbers in integration programs like "Reading Recovery". Boys are more likely to be diagnosed with problems. A growing number of boys are being labelled as suffering emotional, behavioural or learning problems. Many of these are treated with prescribed drugs. The issues are complex and involve social images of children, societal expectations and the developmental needs of boys from diverse backgrounds. Within this situation there are some features that researchers appear to agree about. These are:

- Differences between girls and boys potential are small or negligible
- Females have an advantage in reading achievement and writing skills
- Males are over-represented in special education classes
- Differences are grounded in both biological and cultural factors
- Boys are more likely to be labelled as having problems
- Boys are more likely to be suspended from school
- Boys participation rates are lower
- Boys retention rates are lower (less completed years at school).

Gender differences in educational outcomes exist even if there is little difference in potential. The patterns of disadvantage revolve around social and emotional circumstances as well as test results. Social images of boys have a detrimental effect on attitudes towards boys and expectations of their abilities. If the behaviour of boys leads to discriminatory practices within schools should the child change or the institution? Within this scenario there are members of groups that are traditionally disadvantaged in the institutions of our society. Many of these are boys and therefore suffer double disadvantages.

A longitudinal study in America followed 400 five-year-old girls and boys through school in order to research differences between girls and boys ability to learn to read (D'Arcangelo, 1999). The children were tested in numeracy and literacy annually and researchers found no difference between the girls and boys reading scores. A disquietening factor that did emerge was that boys were 4 times more likely to be identified as having reading problems than girls. What the data revealed was that the teachers used behavioural criteria for selecting children for further evaluation. Boys behaviour made them more noticeable and the quieter girls might not be reading but were not identified as having problems (D'Arcangelo, 1999). Landis comments:

> To say students are selected on the basis of teacher judgment does little to change that fact that how teachers perceive students attitudes/displays of cooperation towards school-related tasks represents a powerful influence upon reasons why students are placed in special (eg remedial as well as advanced) academic programs (eg. Gilmore, 1989) (1997, p. 3).

That the girls not in special programs did better than the boys who had initially had the same scores was another issue. Programs like "Reading Recovery" are expensive. There are studies that indicate that the groups that need help the most are less likely to have successful experiences. Goldenberg (1995) reports that in New Zealand, where "Reading Recovery" was developed, classroom literacy instruction has not solved the problem of disproportionate underachievement by low-income, non-white minorities (1995, p. 105). Such a pattern also exists in America where children from low income, inner city, populations are on average performing on the 20th percentile on national norm-referenced measures for literacy (Grossen, Coulter & Ruggles, 1997). If "Reading Recovery" is least effective in the lowest performing schools then this creates serious questions about equity and raises questions about this type of intervention as a strategy to raise literacy levels.

Curriculum and assessment

Bruner (1996), in a discussion on curriculum and assessment and standards, commented on the curriculum reform movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. In contrast he described the curriculum debates of the 1990s as being "assessment reform" (p.116). Whilst not disagreeing with attempts to improve measuring instruments that will help indicate how children are performing in learning tasks and assist teachers in evaluating their practice he saw the limitations of such measures if that is where the emphasis for reform is to lie.

> And just what is to be turned around? Assessment procedures and "standards"? If only that, then we will succeed only in fueling our internal indignation about how little geography our students know, how badly they read, how sorely lacking they are in understanding what science is about (p. 117).

An example of the limitations of present practice and initiatives can be seen in the educational strategies of the state government in Victoria. The Labor government achieved office, after many years in opposition, coming into power on a promise of rebuilding the ailing health and education systems. After only months in office the Minister of Education announced a new program. This initiative was the Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM). Developed by the Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET) and the Board of Studies the AIM has five areas of focus. These areas are classroom assessment, homework, reporting of results, a learning improvement program to improve student literacy and numeracy and statewide testing.

> AIM is a comprehensive program designed to boost student learning, improve teaching skills and better inform parents. AIM will help teachers accurately monitor student progress. AIM links assessment to teaching and learning programs for more effective and earlier intervention (Education Minister Mary Delahunte quoted by McKinnon, 2000, p. 1).

Of the five areas of AIM the homework guidelines will be taken, for discussion in this section of the paper, as an example of how these types of programs have more to do with ideology and opportunism of politicians than with educational research or social justice. The homework debates have been raging around the world for a century. From being legally banned in California in 1901 to the present, where homework loads are increasing, research is showing that not only are there problems of discrimination about imposing homework on children and families there are also other repercussions (Kralovev and Buell, 2000).

These negative consequences were found to be in the earlier years. As homework could be efficacious in the higher years of school an argument was put forward for good independent study habits to develop children needed a sound foundation in the early years. Teachers in the early years, in pre-schools and child care settings are all too familiar with being urged to prepare children for the future instead of concentrating on present learning.

The American research has not found a case for younger children to be presented with homework. What of the other advantages claimed? Does homework involve parents in their child's schooling? With growing stratification amongst rich and poor is it another form of educational discrimination? Does increasing homework suggest that teachers do not have enough time, or resources, to carry out their functions within schools? Children's developmental needs for social play and physical activity are juxtaposed against rising rates of homework. There is also the suggestion that politicians respond to measures like more homework, more tests, more reporting because these are visible to the electorate.

> ... the fundamental problems that vex American education will not be relieved simply by increasing standards. Nor can we any longer afford the kinds of cheap rhetoric that reinvent higher standards from time to time for political gain (Covington cited in Kralovec & Buell, 2000, p. 36).

Apple (2001) explains these trends as education moving in "conservative directions: toward marketization, standardization, and a loss of teacher autonomy" (p. 9). This American debate is reflected in Australia. Returning to the AIM, the same language is used to describe the values of homework and explain its implementation. Homework is seen as complementing school learning and provides opportunities for parents to participate in their child's education (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 2001). It is the responsibility of school councils, principles and teachers to consult with parents and students to develop a homework policy that is consistent with the Homework Habits: Homework Guidelines (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 2001). In the early years of school homework will:

> Generally not exceed 30 minutes per day and will not be set on weekends and during vacations (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 2000).

The five questions posed above asked about parent involvement, educational discrimination, teacher's time and resources, children's developmental needs and politician response. How does the AIM address these issues? The first, on parents, presents a picture very much at odds to that found in much of the educational literature. Parents as partners is an expression often used (eg. Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000). When parents are viewed as partners there is a suggestion in the words that there is reciprocity between the school and the family. That the child's heritage of culture, language and experiences in the family and wider community will be welcomed within the classroom. However, the practice of expecting parent involvement to take the form of unpaid teacher during home hours is an extension of a classroom that by this act is showing that certain ideologies and attitudes to work are preferred over others (Lubeck, 1996). Parents with particular knowledge of Australian classrooms can more effectively take on this "partnership" role. Families with home libraries, computers and higher levels of education are greatly advantaged in the delivery of formal education if this is to spill into the home. To dictate to parents so prescriptively what their role should be is indicative of classrooms where many cultural and gendered differences create discontinuities between home and school.

Homework and classroom, state and national, assessment have become ideological beacons in the 1990s. Measures like the AIM suggest the trend is increasing. State and national literacy standards and benchmarks are reported as if this is a giant competition. Children identified with difficulties are catered for through remedial programs like "Reading Recovery". The majority of children in these programs are boys and the data available from these intervention programs is not comprehensive enough to defend the interventions. Apart from the limited view of reading that is taken in the program (Landis, 1997) there are other aspects of this approach that can be perceived as open to bias. These include which children are selected to be "recovered" as well as how effective the "recovery" is.

For many children problems of disadvantage can be traced back to the distance between their lifeworld of community experience and the world of institutionalised education and valued knowledge (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). This becomes a question of the interface of subjective experience and curriculum form and content. What are the classroom and curriculum dynamics that make possible a relative fit between curriculum and lifeworld experience? In an age where children are more supervised and tested than ever before assessment has become a curriculum driver as Bruner (1996) suggested.

The diversity of the population and the push towards state and national standards, testing and assessment takes autonomy away from the teacher and the school, is not inclusive and the curriculum is less likely to be organised to be relevant to the lived experience of many of the participants. The Victorian Curriculum Standards Framework 11 that was introduced in 2000 is an example. In a critique of the English (and literacy) CSF 11 document Tylee (2001) identifies the foundation orientation of the framework as being vocational/neo-classical and a product of the "back to basics" movement that aims to prepare children for the workforce. (p. 3). Such an approach is top down, standards for skills and knowledge are externally specified and proponents claim the education supplied meets the needs of the wider society. Attempts to superimpose a more socially critical approach Tylee discusses as problematic. This vocational push is also a significant element in American schooling where educators must show how a proportion of each syllabus is vocationally oriented. Even for four-year-olds (Apple (2001).

As young children enter educational settings they bring differing experiences with them, different languages and ways of using language. This new context will influence how children perceive themselves, their families and their community. The values, attitudes and beliefs of this setting reflect for the child the perceptions of the wider community. This wider community has rigid expectations. Tylee (2001) sums up how the CSF 11 is structured.

> The vocational/neo-classical orientation appears in the rationale statements where literacy is considered to be about "appropriate and effective use of language" (p. 5.) ...The content of speaking and listening, reading and writing is in the functional areas of what a literate person needs to be able to do. ...
>
> The learning outcomes and indicators contain information about what can be expected for students at "every stage of P - 10 schooling" (p. 6). The CSF 11 is intended for teachers to assist them in planning and implementing regular class testing and assessment (Tylee, 2001, p. 4).

Tylee's paper goes on to link the indicators to behavioural objectives which are monitored against CSF 11 standards. Literacy levels are tested in relation to acquired skills. Indicators and identified skills at particular levels are nationally benchmarked. The word "language" in the first quoted paragraph above does not mean language but English. That links between language and consequent literary levels is receiving increasing attention in the literature makes these divisions, especially in the early years, something that needs reconsideration (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

Such a curriculum approach immediately has the potential to disadvantage many groups. Children coming from homes where English is not spoken, children coming from homes where standard English is not their experience, many Indigenous children come from complex language backgrounds and boys reading and writing achievements are statistically lower than girls in standardised assessment procedures from the earliest years. Is there an alternative? In a paper on pupil participation, that examined older children's experiences at school, Ruddock and Flutter (2000) discuss the "question of dealing with the deep structures of school" (p. 1) and inviting active participation of children as a way of dealing with a curriculum that, at present, does not have a transformative concept of knowledge. A differentiation is made between the idea of individual and social transformation.

Participation rights

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) provided for protection from harm, provision of basic services, promotion in special circumstances and participation freedoms. It is these participation rights that are the newest and have the most potential to make our educational institutions more democratic.

Ideas of the child being a cultural protagonist and having participation rights does not mean that the adult world will merely consult with children about the institutions, like schools, designed on their behalf but that provision and promotion will take account of the child's lifeworld. The term lifeworld has been taken from Cope and Kalantzis (2000). The view of schooling and curriculum taken by these authors and their ideas of lifeworld and linguistic diversity add depth to the present discussion. Cope and Kalantzis take the concept of lifeworld to be "one's everyday life or community experience" (p. 3).

> It indicates that when we are talking about cultural differences as a critical determiner of outcomes, we are talking about the broad dynamics of power and privilege, of history and location, of the accident of birth and life experience (p. 3).

How can a classroom take account of history and experience? How can the inclusive classroom be achieved? One way would be by acknowledging difference and giving legitimacy to difference by making cultural, linguistic, socio/economic and gender diversity visible in the classroom. For example, children do not encounter variants of English in the classroom even though, for many, variants of English are used and experienced in the home and community. Bi-lingual teachers use standard English in the classroom. If Anglo-celtic use of English is taken as standard English then children do not have the opportunity to learn with those who have a different background or experience. Others do not necessarily see their lives and their families represented in an "Australian" classroom. Boundaries do not get broken down as children become proficient at using various Englishes in the formal education setting. Children are competent at code switching from an early age and can move between accents, languages and social language use with adeptness. This competence could be used to socially transform the early childhood classroom by providing different models of English. To quote Cope and Kalantzis again as they argue for a pluralist alternative:

> Pluralism is both an ambitious program and a minimalist, unambitious program. It is ambitious in the sense that it is based on the argument that the mainstream needs to be transformed. It is unambitious in that it does no more than take the limited equity argument at its word. To the question of what are the conditions of mere equity - not equality - the only answer can be: an educational system which does not habitually favour and reward some lifeworld experiences over others (pp. 5 - 6).

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the Australian classroom and children in the early years of school in relation to policy, practice and societal beliefs and prejudices. Boys and literacy has been an underlying theme and the theme extended to issues of inequity and inequality generally. As the wealth divide in Australia widens this is reflected in government funding of schools. This divide is the context in which the discussion of educational practice has been situated as it is seen as a threat to educational reform and the achievement of a more democratic and inclusive education system.

Many groups are identified within our schools as being at risk. One group, the boys, make up almost half the school population. Other groups, like Aboriginal and Torres Straight Island children, are small. In both cases educational programs have not successfully addressed needs. Many of our practices, like the use of homework, have long histories and motivations for such strategies could be claimed to be more political than a result of research. Assessment, testing and narrow views of language and literacy can indicate accountability or be used as weapons of disadvantage.

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